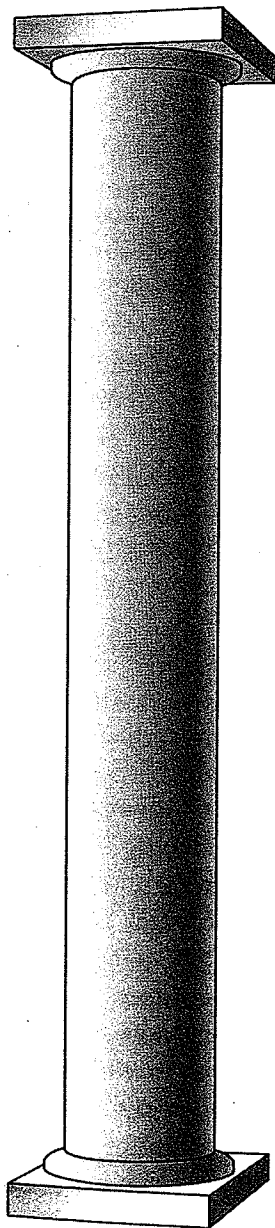


5



Beyond Fake Writing: The Power of Choice

When my seniors walked into my classroom the first week of the school year, I asked them to jot down what came to their minds when I said the word “writing.” Todd, seventeen, wrote:

During the course of our school years we are forced to write essays on topics that we care nothing about just to make our teachers look good.

The bad news is that Todd’s response is typical. The worse news, I am afraid, is that his lament contains much truth. By the time students reach their last year of high school, many of them have come to see writing as just another school-induced hoop to jump through—an obstacle that must be circumvented in order to reach the high school finish line. Any desires they once may have had as writers have long been buried under too many formulaic book reports, too many standardized research papers, too many attempts to analyze the author’s use of . . . (fill in the technique). They have had years of writing tasks thrust upon them—writing tasks they often find uninteresting

and irrelevant. In some cases, writing has even been used to *punish* them (e.g., writing one hundred sentences for misbehaving).

In my first book, *Reading Reasons*, I make the point that students have also lost sight of the value of reading. I argue that, as teachers, we need to help students to understand the intrinsic reasons why reading is more than just another school requirement. In that book, I proposed ten reasons why students should be readers. Unfortunately, we are faced with the same level of opposition when it comes to motivating young writers. Many of our students have lost sight of the real value that comes from writing well. Like reading, students often see writing as just another painful obstacle they must overcome to earn a diploma. This is unfortunate, because we, as teachers, know that the value of writing extends far past school. We know, for example, that:

Writing helps you to be a better reader.

Writing makes you smarter.

Writing helps you in the workplace.

Writing prepares you to get into and through college.

Writing helps you to persuade others.

Writing enables you to fight oppression.

Writing is a necessary skill to have in the dawn of an information age.

In short, writing anchors a literate life, and we know that students who write well will reap the rewards long after high school is over. With this in mind, we have one year to get our students to discover the value of writing; we have one year to help them understand that we don't assign writing just to make the teacher look better. If we are to be successful in getting our students to turn the corner as writers, we must put them in a position to see that writing is much more than a school-induced hoop to jump through to reach graduation. For literate adults, writing is one of life's staples.

Beyond Fake Writing

One reason students don't write well is that they do not care what they are writing about. If you think about it, we often ask students to do the kind of writing that we, as adults, *never* do. When was the last time you sat down at home and wrote a draft analyzing Shakespeare's use of biblical allusions in *Hamlet*? Or wrote a letter that aligned perfectly to a rigid, five-paragraph format? It seems to me that we spend a lot of time preparing students for "fake writing"—the kinds of writing they will never do once they leave school.

Does this mean that we should stop teaching students to write literary analysis essays? No. I want all of my students to be able to analyze literature at a deeper level because I believe doing so gives them the cognitive underpinnings to analyze the world outside of the novel. What I am suggesting, however, is that before we plunge our students into some of the traditional

"school" writing, maybe we should invest some time in having them write about things they actually care about. If we first get our students up and running as writers, they will be better equipped when the time does come for them to write about Golding's use of symbolism in *Lord of the Flies*.

Choice Is Where It Starts

It has been my experience that students write a whole lot better when they care about what they are writing. I have also found that they are much more likely to care about what they are writing when they are given choice in writing topics. Choice generates a welcome chain reaction: it creates student buy-in, which in turn generates writing motivation, which in turn causes students to write better. Choice is where it starts for reluctant writers, and if we want them to warm up to writing, we need to structure our classes so that our students have some say in what they write.

Allowing Students to Choose Writing Topics Creates Two Immediate Benefits

1. Choice fosters a feeling of ownership in the writer. When a student develops ownership, she is much more likely not only to start a paper, but to maintain a stronger work ethic while in the drafting process.
2. Choice drives better revision. The number-one determiner in whether a student of mine will spend meaningful time revising a first draft is whether she cares about the paper. A student who cares about her paper is much more likely to closely revise; a student who does not care about her paper will treat the revision process lightly, if at all.

Choice is good, but we are living in the age of standards, and I can hear you thinking as you read this, "But what about the standards? I have many different discourses I must teach! How do I balance the demands of my grade-level standards with the notion of allowing students to choose their writing topics?"

I certainly feel these same pressures. In California, where I teach, I am expected to teach the following discourses to my ninth-grade students:

- Biographical and autobiographical narratives or short stories
- Literary analysis essays
- Expository compositions, including analytical essays and research reports
- Persuasive compositions
- Business letters

On the one hand I am advocating that students will write better when allowed to choose their writing topics; on the other hand the state requires that I teach a number of very specific discourses. This creates a delicate balancing act for English teachers (see Figure 5.1).

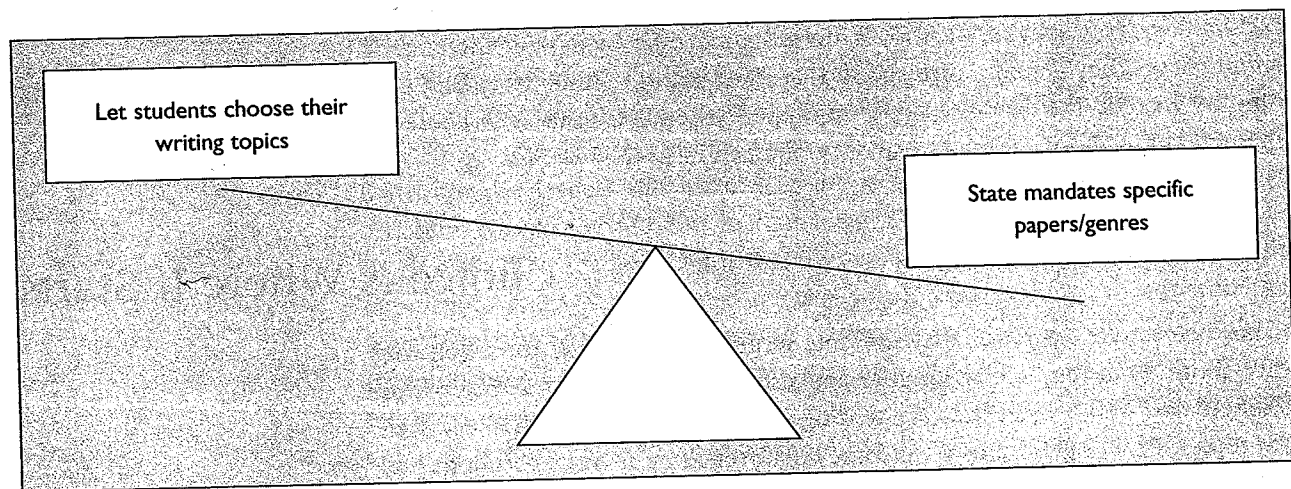


Figure 5.1 *Teeter-totter*

In the rush to meet the numerous writing standards, how do we infuse choice? How do we allow students to select their writing topics and still make sure that we teach all the required writing discourses? Can this balance be managed in this age of testing concerns?

Two Guiding Principles of a Writing Classroom

I will make the case in this chapter that student choice can be generated in our classrooms without sacrificing the goal of teaching the mandated discourses. In order to maintain this delicate balance, I advocate two guiding principles:

1. Sometimes we have to take a step backward before we can move forward.
2. Teachers can work students into the required discourses slowly by designing writing assignments that allow for partial student choice.

Let's explore these two guiding principles. I will briefly elaborate on why each principle is important and will share a number of effective writing strategies I have used to help establish each of them in my own classroom.

Principle #1: Sometimes We Have to Take a Step Backward Before We Can Move Forward

Imagine that your state has passed a mandate that every student in your third-period class must play in a varsity basketball game. Many of your students tell you that they don't see the point of playing basketball and tell you they would rather not participate. You scoff at this notion, telling your students there is much beauty in the game of basketball, that basketball is important, and you reassure them that the game is good for them. To illustrate the greatness of basketball, you randomly choose a student and insert him into Friday night's

game. Without much experience or confidence going into the contest, the student immediately finds himself overwhelmed. He plays poorly, and is relieved when the game is over. He leaves the game hoping he will not have to play basketball again.

No one would teach adolescents to play basketball this way. It would be cruel. But isn't this how we teach our teenagers to write? We tell students that writing is worthwhile. They tell us they don't like to write. We scoff at that, telling them that the big game is coming (the state-mandated writing exam). We insert them into pressure writing situations (their efforts will be scrutinized and graded). When they finish the "game" they are grateful that it is over and hope not to write again any time soon.

Before I can concern myself with any of the specific discourses, I must first work on breaking down the negativity that many of my students carry with them regarding writing. It doesn't matter what writing standards our students are being held accountable for if they come to us with an aversion that is so strong they won't take any ownership of their writing. This is a bigger issue than simply a testing issue. Tests come and go, but attitudes about writing can be *lifelong*. This may be one of the more controversial stands I make in this book, but *I am advocating that we ignore the mandated discourses until we have had a chance to help students warm up to writing*. We have to work students through and beyond their anti-writing bias before we worry whether every standard is taught. It is unconscionable for me to feel satisfaction about teaching every standard if I get to the end of the school year and find that my students still dislike writing.

Job one is to get students interested in writing. Until students warm up to writing they will never work hard developing their writing skills. Think about it: when was the last time you took a strong interest and worked hard on something you really hated doing? Can you think of one example? I can't. (Well, maybe one. Doing my taxes. But I only do those to avoid an up-close and personal meeting with the IRS. If any employee of the IRS is reading this, let me reiterate what a fine job you are doing and recognize how under-appreciated you are in your line of work). Generally speaking, however, people do not work hard on tasks they hate doing. This is the very problem writing teachers confront year in and year out. Many of our students come to us with a strong distaste for writing, yet we unrealistically expect them to immediately roll up their sleeves and get into the writing flow of our classrooms. Though writing generates in them the same feeling that I get every year when faced with doing my taxes, we remain surprised and disheartened when they balk at completing their writing assignments.

Before we can get reluctant students to write well in any mandated discourse, we first have to warm them up to the notion of writing. Before I insert my students into the writing "game," I want them to have tons of safe practice under their belts. I want them to write daily for an extended period of time before we focus on any specific discourse. In my ninth-grade classes, this means I will spend much of the first quarter of the school year breaking down

their resistance to writing. I focus on building up their interest and motivation in writing before entering them into serious competition (e.g., mandated genres or state testing). I do this not only by suggesting some interesting writing possibilities, but by allowing my students some choice as they begin to get their feet wet as writers.

In short, sometimes we have to take a step backward before we can move students forward. I am not going to stick a kid into a basketball game who does not how to dribble the ball. With this in mind, here are ten writing assignments I use early in the year to help ease my students into writing. These are assignments that even reluctant adolescent writers like doing.

1. Find the Fib

Below you will find six statements about me. Five of the statements are true; one is a fib. Can you guess which one is the fib?

1. Tiger Woods was a student of mine when he was in high school.
2. I was once an extra in a Dustin Hoffman movie.
3. I almost ran over a famous NFL quarterback with my car as he was jogging down the street.
4. In Italy, I was robbed at gunpoint. The gunman took my passport.
5. I had a terrible brain freeze on national television as a contestant on a television game show.
6. I once shook hands with the president of the United States.

Five are true; one is a fib. After students try to guess the correct answer, I have them generate four statements about themselves. They exchange papers and have their peers guess which one of their statements they believe to be false. The student who fools the most classmates is recognized at the end of the activity. Students are then asked to choose one of their truths and tell the story in writing. Very rarely do they shy away at this writing assignment; in fact, just the opposite occurs—by the time we get to the end of the activity, students are eager to write their stories.

My falsehood, by the way, is number one. Although Tiger did attend high school in Anaheim, he was never a student of mine. The other five statements are true, though I'd rather not relive three of them.

2. Establish Writing Territories

Nancie Atwell, in her seminal work, *In the Middle*, introduces the idea that every student has territories from which good writing can spring. We are all experts in specific territories. In Figure 5.2, you'll see my writing territories, which I share with my students.

Once their writing territories are established, students are asked to produce various "sneezes"—short, twenty-minute writing explorations into a given territory. Because students have generated their own territories, there is much more buy-in on their part. It also helps that I "sneeze" alongside them.

My Writing Territories		
My children	Learning to drive	Playing HS basketball
Wife	Two auto accidents	Coach Purcell
In-laws	Scuba diving	Coaching HS basketball
My sister's troubled history	My 1st year teaching	Political activism
The ravages of drug abuse	Vegas boys' trips	Photography
My dog, Beezus	Europe	Jumping off bridges
Boogie boarding	NYC	Hunting sharks
Body surfing	Washington, D.C.	Broken bones
Umpiring	Florida	Getting stitched up ... again
Reading	Maui	Emergency room visits
Writing	Berkeley	My 99-year-old grandmother
Music	Mexico	My Aunt Dolores
My car history	River rafting through Grand Canyon	Kobe
My pet history	Field trips	OJ
My hair history	Public speaking	JFK assassination
My concert history	Frisbee golf	Why Apples are better than PCs
Traffic tickets	Skateboarding (old school)	Ipods
Psycho ex-girlfriends	College stories	Airplane stories
Dating stories	Politics	Airplane food
Waiting tables	Being a congressional intern	Mapquest hell
Memorable baseball games	Talking to famous people	Picketing
Baseball cards	Meeting Jackson Browne	Toilet papering houses
Volleyball tournaments	TV game show appearance	Illnesses—my uncle's Parkinson's
Teaching stories	My movie "appearance"	Standing w/out pants on a runway in Miami
Memorable students	Practical jokes	Photography
Memorable teachers	Football road trips	Breakfast cereal history
Memorable principals	Death in waves	

Figure 5.2 Gallagher's writing territories

I have them explore a new territory daily for the first four days of the week, and on Friday they choose their best initial draft and revise it. We do this for a couple of weeks early in the school year and then periodically revisit and add to their writing territories as the year progresses.

3. Funneling a Writing Territory

Ralph Fletcher, in *What a Writer Needs* (1993), writes about the importance of getting students to narrow their focus before they write—to write “smaller” (p. 49). The smaller a student writes, Fletcher argues, the more interesting a piece of writing often becomes. I was reminded of this when I read a piece in *Newsweek* about the AIDS crisis in Africa (Zeititz 2003). The article was laden with startling facts (8,000 die every day due to the disease; the U.S. is spending \$2.4 billion annually to help solve the problem [p. 14]), but the image I will always remember from the article is one of a young man standing on a street corner selling coffins. More than the statistic of 8,000 deaths every day, it is the image of that lone person selling coffins on the street that I find deeply touching. It's an image that is seared into my brain and a testament to the power of small writing.

One of the dangers when students are given choice is that they will often write large—so broadly that their essays drown in blandness. Jesus, a fan of Disneyland, indicated to me in a writing conference that he'd like to write about "going to Disneyland." I recorded our conversation (I am "KG"):

KG: Disneyland, huh? Okay. What, specifically, are you going to write about?

Jesus: I told you, Mr. G—Disneyland.

KG: I know your topic is going to be Disneyland, and I look forward to reading your paper, but what about Disneyland are you going to write about?

Jesus: It's my favorite amusement park.

KG: Okay, I am good with that, but what is the focus of your essay going to be?

Jesus: That Disneyland is a great place to visit.

It was clear that Jesus, a reluctant writer, needed a little help in finding a focus point for his essay. With Fletcher in mind, I guided Jesus into "funneling" his topic (see Figure 5.3).

The conversation continued:

KG: Before you begin writing, let's try a strategy that good writers often use to help narrow their topic. I call it funneling. [I show Jesus the funneling chart.] Do you know what a funnel is?

Jesus: Yes, it helps pour liquid.

KG: Right. You pour a lot of liquid in the top, but at the bottom only a little comes out. In a way, a funnel narrows the liquid.

Jesus: Okay.

KG: Instead of putting water into the top of the funnel, let's put in your topic, a trip to Disneyland, and see if we can narrow it down a little.

Jesus: Okay, but how do I do that?

KG: Write "Disneyland" in the largest box. Let's think about your experiences at Disneyland. Have you been to the park more than once?

Jesus: Yes, I have been there many times.

KG: Does any particular visit stand out? When you think of your visits to the park, which visit is most memorable?

Jesus: My first visit.

KG: Good. That's a bit narrower. Write that in the next box. Now, when you think of your first visit to Disneyland, what memory first comes to mind?

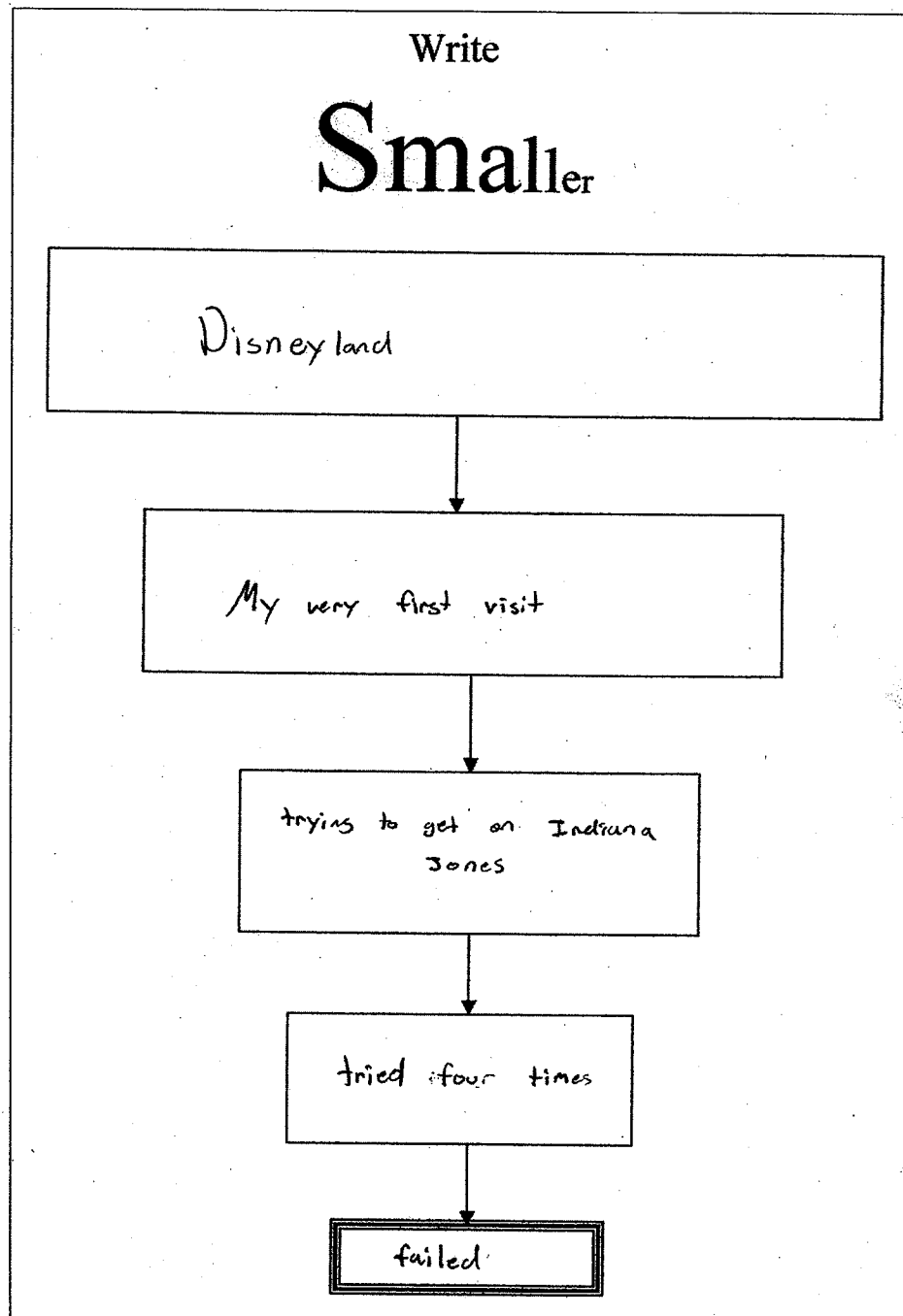
Jesus: Trying to get on the Indiana Jones ride.

KG: Good. Put that in the next box. Now what was memorable about trying to get on the Indiana Jones ride?

Jesus: They had this sign with a line drawn on it, and you had to be as tall as the line or they would not let you on the ride. I was, like, an inch too short.

KG: So what did you do?

Figure 5.3 Funnel graphic organizer



Jesus: I tried to get on the ride four different times and each time they wouldn't let me on. I tried different strategies, but none of them worked.

KG: What do you mean when you say you tried different strategies?

Jesus: Well, the first two times I just tried to walk on all normal. After the guy wouldn't let me on, I waited until there was a new guy working the line. I tried it again, but he wouldn't let me on either.

KG: So what did you do?

Jesus: The third time I tried walking through the line on my tiptoes.

KG: (*laughs*) Did that work?

Jesus: Nah, he figured out what I was doing.

KG: Did you give up at that point?

Jesus: No, I tried once more. This time my uncle lent me his boots. I put them on and walked through the line again.

KG: Did it work?

Jesus: No. I was still too short. Just barely.

KG: How'd you feel when you were denied the fourth time?

Jesus: It sucked. They should of let me on. It was my first trip to Disneyland and all I wanted to do was ride that ride.

KG: You have a great story here—the day you tried to get on Indiana Jones. It's funny. It's interesting. Do you think you could try to capture this story in writing?

Jesus: I can try.

KG: Great. Go for it. When you finish your sneeze bring it back and we'll play with it.

When we had finished, Jesus had completed his funneling of the story. Before the funnel, Jesus was intent on writing about "going to Disneyland," an incredibly broad topic sure to produce a bland piece of writing. After finishing the funnel, he had narrowed his topic down to a more interesting, narrower topic: his mission to get on the Indiana Jones roller coaster. See Figure 5.4 for Jesus's "smaller" Disneyland first draft. In Appendix 7 you will find a reproducible copy of the funnel handout.

4. Topic Blast

Another way to encourage smaller writing is to have students choose one writing territory and "blast" it into as many pieces as possible. In Figure 5.5 you will find Joanna's topic blast for her quinceañera (fifteenth birthday), which in Mexican tradition represents the passing from childhood to adulthood for girls. The celebrations are elaborate and reminiscent of weddings. I sat down in a writing conference with Joanna and in a five-minute discussion she blasted her quinceañera into a number of smaller writing topics.

Had Joanna simply been asked to "write about your quinceañera," I have no doubt she would have produced a bland paper. Blasting the topic led her to a number of smaller, more interesting topics. See Appendix 8 for a reproducible Topic Blast chart.

5. The Myth of the Boring Topic

Bruce Ballenger, in *The Curious Researcher* (2001), introduces the idea of the myth of the boring topic. Ballenger argues that any topic is interesting if one takes a moment to scratch under its surface.

Too Short

Ever since I was little, I wanted to go the magical place I had never been to but had seen many times on television—Disneyland. I can still remember the commercials, with Cinderella riding in her carriage and the castle with the fireworks exploding behind it. I was looking forward to going on the teacups and the bumper cars and some of the other rides but I wanted the go on the ride with the most excitement, Indiana Jones.

As I passed through the gates it seemed almost like a dream to good to be true. There was a big parade going on and I almost got run over by a rhino. None of this bothered me, though, because I was on my way to ride the Indiana Jones ride.

Suddenly, I ran into it. The door was big, dark, and was covered with spider webs. Around the door was spears and at the tip of the spears there where human skulls. I knew this was the ride for me.

Then my uncle said, "Let's go on this ride it looks like it will be a good one." We walked down a dark hall which was covered in spider webs. It seemed to go on for ever. We were tired when we got to the end. The place looked just like the movie where Indiana Jones tries to out run the giant boulder. We were lucky because we were there early and we didn't have to wait long.

As I was about to get on the ride a tall man came out of nowhere and asked me to put my back against a sign with an arrow which was barely above my head. Then he said the words that would ruin my day, "I'm sorry, but you are too short for this ride." I was furious! The only ride I really wanted to go on and this man says I was too short.

I got out of line, waited a few minutes, and re-entered thinking I could make it the second time. But as I reached the front of the line my mortal enemy saw me again and told me I was too short and to leave the line. Normally, if someone tells you that you are too short to get on a ride you would most likely give up and leave before you get even madder. But not me.

While my uncle was finishing the ride I started to think of a new plan. When he got off the ride I asked him to come with me as I tried to get on again. This time I walked faster and more confident that he would let me on the ride. As I reached the sign, I put my plan into action. I stood on my tip toes sure that he wouldn't notice. It didn't work. He took one look at me and said, "Stand up straight and put your feet flat on the ground." Busted again.

After leaving I told my uncle I wanted to try one last time. As we approached the front of the line I asked my uncle to take off his boots.

"Why?" he asked.

"I am planning to use your boots to look taller," I answered.

I put his boots on. They felt warm and wet I'm guessing sweat.

When I got to the boarding area I was again told to stand with my back to the side. This time I was really sure they would let me on the one ride I really wanted to ride.

"Sorry," said the Devil Man. "You are too short. Please exit."

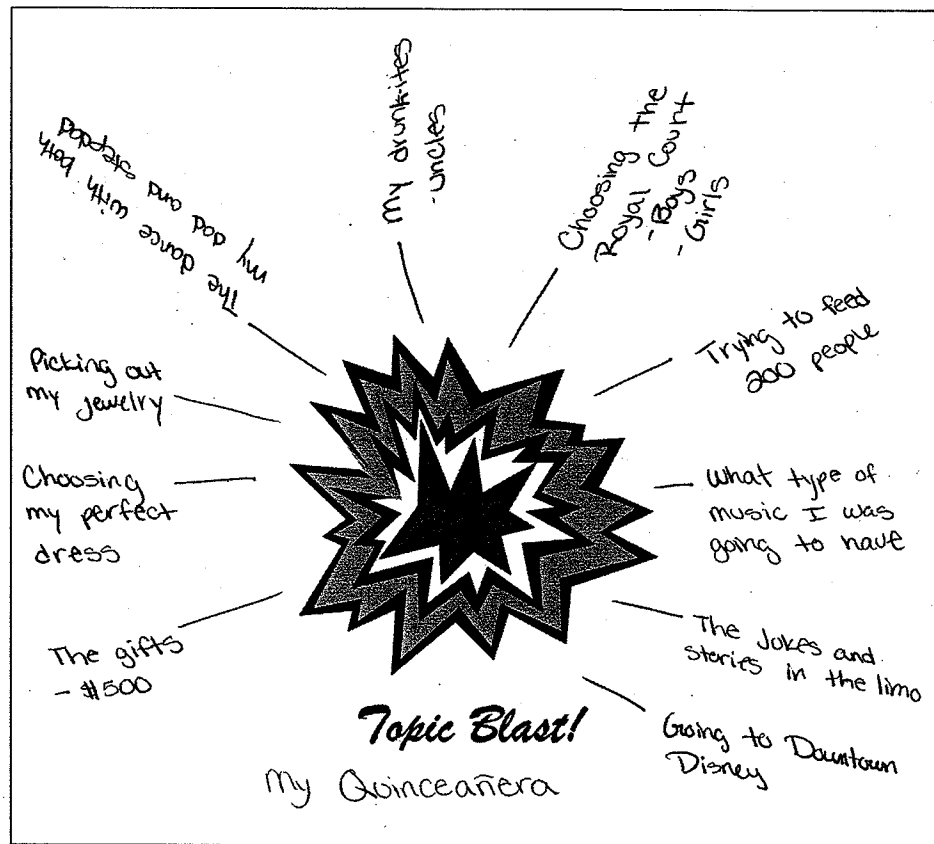
I was happy to finally visit Disneyland, but I will always remember the Indiana Jones ride as "the one that got away."

Figure 5.4 Jesus's Disney essay

To illustrate Ballenger's concept, I stood at my door one morning as my ninth-grade students entered the classroom. As they walked in the room, I said, "Good morning," and handed each student a dollar bill. (I am reasonably sure that this had never happened to them before!) When they had settled into their seats, I asked how many of them had ever seen a dollar bill before. They laughed. I then began the lesson by explaining that even though they had all seen dollar bills, my guess was that few, if any, of them had actually carefully *considered* a dollar bill. "A dollar may appear to be a common, boring, everyday item," I told them, "but if you think about it, that's not true at all. Dollars are fascinating."

"How so?" asked Kenny.

Figure 5.5 Topic blast
example (Joanna)



"Think of all the interesting facts, stories, and history behind a dollar," I responded. "Think of all the questions a single dollar generates. Can anyone in the room think of one interesting question that spins out of a single dollar?"

"How do people counterfeit them?" asked Adam. The class laughed.

"Great question," I responded. "Let me put that question on the overhead. Adam's question is interesting, and if you start thinking about that dollar in front of you, I'm sure other interesting questions will begin to flow. I am going to give each group ten minutes to generate a list of interesting questions about your dollars. I challenge each group to write the most interesting set of questions. Go."

Ten minutes later, I brought the groups back together and created a classroom list on the overhead projector. Below is the list generated by my fourth-period ninth-grade class.

Why George Washington?
How do you get a job making money?
What are the serial numbers for?
Who signs the dollar?
What is the history of this dollar?
What is the life span of a dollar?
What is the Federal Reserve?

Who makes the dollar? Where?
Why the phrase, "In God We Trust"?
What kind of paper is used? Ink?
What steps are taken against counterfeiting?
Why paper instead of a coin?
How much \$ does it take to make a dollar?
Is it really a crime to destroy a dollar?

Why does the pyramid have an eyeball?
Why not more color?
Why only white people on our money?
Why letters in the serial number?
Why are there 13 parts to the pyramid?
Why these specific denominations?
Can you photocopy a dollar?
Who designed the dollar?

Why green as primary color?
Is there a hidden spider on the dollar?
What do the Latin words mean?
Why are there "hairs" inside the dollar?
Who decides who is pictured?
Why not a three-dollar bill?
What is the penalty for counterfeiting?
Has the design ever changed?

This exercise helps students to see that there is no such thing as a boring topic. Once the classroom brainstorm has been generated and shared, each student takes out a sheet of paper and is asked to choose a really "boring" topic. The new topic is written at the top of the paper, then passed around the room. When students receive a new paper with a "boring" topic on it, they are asked to try to generate an interesting question for it. After the papers have been passed throughout the class, students receive their topics back, each with a number of interesting questions written below it. Gerardo, for example, chose the topic "rocks." When he got his paper back, he found the following questions:

How many types of rocks are there?
What makes them different colors?
Why do people collect them?
What are they made of?
Why are some rocks more valuable than others?
Where do rocks come from?
How can you figure out how old a rock is?
Where is the largest rock?
What shapes them?
Where did the word *rock* originate?

Crystal's topic was "water." She was asked:

Which drinking water is best?
How do you clean water?
Where does our drinking water come from?
Why does some water make you sick?
What lives in water? How many organisms live in a single drop?
Is water organic or inorganic?
Why is water clear?
Has water been found anywhere else other than earth?
Is there enough water for everyone?
Why does our body need water?
Is it true that of our bodies are mostly made up of water?
Is flavored water bad for you?

Students are then asked to choose one question that particularly intrigues them and go find the answer. (It helps if they have been taught some research

skills; I do a mini-lesson on how to use Google.) They bring their notes to class the next day and write their explanations. Upon completion, the students then pass their questions and answers around the class, providing not only a valuable opportunity for students to read each other's writing, but also providing the students (and teacher) with lots of interesting information.

A Variation of This Exercise The "Myth of the Boring Topic" exercise can be varied using objects other than a dollar bill. For example, fill up a brown grocery bag with everyday items (e.g., a baseball, a bottle of water, a key, a sock, and a candy bar). Make sure there are enough items in the bag so that each student in the class will be able to draw out one item. Each student then reaches into the bag blindly and pulls out an item. Once he or she has taken an item, the student then brainstorms as many interesting questions as possible. Eventually, he or she chooses one question from the brainstorm and goes to find the answer.

And, in case you're wondering, the answer is yes—I do collect my dollars before the end of the period.

6. What Bugs Me

In *A Writer's Notebook: Unlocking the Writer Within You* (1996), Ralph Fletcher has his students list things they find irritating. Here is my list, inspired by Fletcher:

- Talking loudly on cell phones at inappropriate times and places
- People who drive "cell phone drunk"
- Squeezing the middle of the toothpaste tube
- CD packaging
- The following expressions: "free gift," "totally destroyed," "no problem," and "You go, girl!"
- Local "news" broadcasts
- "Reality" television (especially MTV's *My Sweet Sixteen*)
- Standing in line—any line
- Filling my car with gas
- Subscription cards that fall out of magazines
- "Dumb" traffic signals
- Students who do not return books to my classroom library
- South Coast Plaza (local shopping mall) on December 26
- Telephone sales calls
- Leg cramps
- Liver
- Rude service in restaurants
- Fans who switch allegiance to other teams when their team is struggling (a.k.a. frontrunners)
- Car door dingers in parking lots
- People with fourteen items in the ten-items-or-less line at the grocery store
- Paying by check in a cash-only line
- Ticketmaster fees
- Parents who take ten-year-olds to R-rated movies
- Dangerous freeway drivers
- The rule in the NFL that says the ground cannot cause a fumble
- Baseball's designated hitter rule
- Hallowed baseball records broken by steroid users
- Using the last of the toilet paper roll and not replacing it
- Placing a milk carton back in the refrigerator when it has five drops of milk left in it
- Bags in cereal boxes that cannot be opened without completely mangling the bag
- Haggling with car salespeople
- Choosing a new cell phone plan

Students love to write about things that annoy them. There is something about this topic that brings out strong voice in my students' writing, as evidenced by the following excerpt from Brianna's essay (note: this excerpt is still in the revision stage; she has not edited it for errors):

When the lights dim, I think the movie is about to start. Nope, more previews. Now that "The Twenty" is over and I know what Whoopi Goldberg's real name is and how much Oprah makes in a year (not that I give a rat's tail), I finally get to see previews of movies that should be coming out within the next decade or so. Ten minutes of this insanity creeps by and throughout it the couple sitting two rows behind me are exchanging spit and the person three seats to my right who has already seen the movie is talking obnoxiously loud about all the good parts, ruining what's left of my anticipation. To make matters worse, Snow White and her seven dwarfs are on the screen showing off their anniversary edition DVD right before the movie Saw 2. Nothing like seven dwarfs before seven deaths. Saw 2 finally starts and I'm sitting there out of money and out of Junior Mints. The people in back of me put their smelly feet onto the seat and open their bottled soda unleashing a fizzle that scares my organs into not functioning.

When students care about what they are writing, their voice emerges.

7. Good Ideas/Bad Ideas

Another way to interest students in writing is to begin by having them brainstorm good and bad ideas they have encountered. I begin by sharing my list with them:

Good Ideas	Bad Ideas
Our International Week assembly	Removing the lockers from our school
Juice smoothie	McRib sandwich
Televisions in the back of airplane seats	Televisions in cars
Developing a daily reading habit	Cutting back the hours of our community's library
Freeway dots to divide lanes	Neglecting upkeep on our highways
iPod	Beta-Max
MADD	Blanket "zero tolerance" school policy
In-line skates	Skates built into tennis shoes
Cup holders in cars	"Pimping your ride" so that your car has a fish tank in the trunk
"Old school" Mr. Potato Head toy	New plastic Mr. Potato Head toy
Printing airline boarding passes online	Airlines have stopped serving meals
Disposable mop heads	Robotic vacuum cleaners

Once their brainstorming is completed, I have students choose one idea and complete a "topic blast" (see page 100). They are then ready to start drafting.

8. Explorations

A few years ago I heard Dan Kirby, co-author of *Inside Out: Developmental Strategies for Teaching Writing* (Kirby, Kirby, and Liner 1988), speak about the importance of memoir writing. In his presentation, Kirby suggested a number of places writers can explore for interesting writing topics. I share Kirby's ideas below, with my adaptations, which I have put into a first-quarter writing plan:

Week	Category	Areas to Explore for Writing Ideas
Week 1	Names	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Origins of your name• History of your name• The story of how you were named• Advantages and inconveniences about your name• Why you like/dislike your name• Teasing about your name
Week 2	Snapshots	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A photograph that first comes to mind• Your most treasured photograph• The photograph you wish you had never taken (or been in)• A photograph that taught you something• The photograph you most associate with loss; Happiness; A change in your life
Week 3	Boundaries	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Maps in your mind of special places• Home(s)• Neighborhood(s)• School(s)• Countries
Week 4	Artifacts	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Treasured items• Most treasured possession• Artifacts passed from generation to generation• Memories that come from holding a treasured item• An item that is of no monetary value but is priceless
Week 5	Family	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Family stories/legends• How people in your family met (or parted)• Characters in your family• Special family occasions• Family rituals/traditions• Roles and responsibilities in your family
Week 6	Ethnicity, Race, and Culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Immigration stories• Racism anecdotes• Overcoming language barriers• Overcoming cultural barriers• Strangers-in-a-strange-land stories
Week 7	Mysteries	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Secrets among family members or friends• Unsolved crimes or practical jokes• Things that are puzzling; riddles• Unexplained occurrences

Week	Category	Areas to Explore for Writing Ideas
Week 8	Parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relationships • Tensions • Joys • Intense times/struggles • Learning something unexpected about your parent(s) • Seeing your parent(s) in a new light
Week 9	Celebratory Times	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Weddings • Births • Memorable parties • Overcoming a problem • Awards and recognition • Achieving a new level • Winning unexpectedly
Week 10	Difficult Times	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Life in crisis • Death • Illness • Family problems • Neighborhood problems • Coping with loss • Coping with uncertainty, doubt

If your goal in the first quarter is to get your students into writing, these have proven to be successful motivators. One year I introduced one of these places to explore each week and asked my students to write five weekly pages in their writer's notebooks. By the end of the first quarter they had fifty pages of interesting memoir writing and were well on their way to overcoming their disdain for writing.

9. I Remember . . .

Another effective strategy useful to help students write about their experiences is to introduce Edward Montez's poem, "I Remember." After reading through it a number of times, I have students write their own "I Remember" poem. In Figure 5.6 you will find a poem written by Stephanie, a ninth grader. Once Stephanie had written her "I Remember" poem, each stanza became a potential writing topic to explore on future writing days.

10. Pass the Portrait

As students walk into the room, I hand each of them an unusual photograph cut from magazine advertisements. Students study the photographs and begin writing stories about them. They write for three minutes and then each student passes both the photograph and partial draft clockwise to the person sitting next to him or her. When a student receives the next photograph, he or she studies it before reading the partial draft, and then picks up writing where

Figure 5.6 Stephanie's poem

I Remember

By Stephanie Castro

I remember the scent of rice pudding cooking on cold winter nights.
And tossing and turning under thick blankets in the summer heat.
I remember my hair blowing wildly into the air from the ceiling fan.
And my cousins dumping grass in my hair while I played with dolls on the porch.
I remember the screaming siren of an ambulance siren in the dark, knowing it was a cry of death.
And chasing the ice cream truck down the street when it drove through my neighborhood.
I remember Grandma sitting in her favorite plastic chair in the sun.
And lying on the edge of the swimming pool, baking in the sun like we had just come out of the oven.
I remember father toiling in the garden while I swung back and forth on my swing set.
And going to the movie theater with \$10 in my pocket, \$7.50 for the ticket and the rest was mine.
I remember eating ice cream and popcorn, rooting for the villains to win, and they never did, but that was yesterday.

the draft left off. This process is repeated a number of times until, eventually, every student gets his or her initial draft back. Students are then placed in small groups and asked to share their stories. They nominate the "best" one and each group picks one person to read the story to the class.

This exercise has never failed to interest my students in writing. For homework, students can finish the draft (if it is, indeed, unfinished), or they may begin revising it.

Principle #2: Teachers Can Work Students into the Required Discourses Slowly by Designing Writing Assignments That Allow for Partial Student Choice

After my students have begun to warm up to writing, I begin leading them into the various required discourses through writing assignments that still allow for partial student choice. Here are some partial-choice assignments for the four most common discourses (autobiographical narratives, responses to literature, expository essays, and persuasive compositions):

Limited Choice Assignment for Autobiographical Narratives:

The Introduce Yourself Notebook

This assignment, developed with my colleague John Powers, requires each student to write a number of autobiographical sketches. The project is broken down into two parts; part one contains required assignments; part two allows

for student choice. Below are the directions I give my students for the Introduce Yourself Booklet:

Part One (cover page plus three essays)

Part one of your booklet must consist of the following four items:

1. **Booklet Cover:** Your booklet cover should convey something about you. The cover can be literal or metaphorical, and you may use drawings, pictures, or symbols that relate to your personality or interests. Your name should appear prominently on the cover. Also include the teacher's name, the period, and the date.
2. **Myself, the Writer:** Write a reflective piece about yourself as a writer. Consider some or all of the following questions/prompts: What are your thoughts about yourself as a writer? Do you like to write? If yes, why? If no, why not? Discuss a memorable writing assignment (good or bad). What are your strengths and weaknesses as a writer? Which writer(s) do you admire? What goal(s) do you have as a writer this year?
3. **Myself, the Reader:** Write a reflective piece about yourself as a reader. Consider some or all of the following questions/prompts: Do you like to read? If yes, why? If no, why not? Do you read much? What materials interest you? Why do you like to read (or why do you dislike reading)? Discuss a memorable reading experience (good or bad). What are your strengths and weaknesses as a reader? What goal(s) do you have as a reader this year?
4. **My Biographer and Me:** *This is the only piece in the Introduce Yourself Booklet not written by you.* Choose someone who has known you for a long time and who knows you well (e.g., a parent, grandparent, uncle, or older sister, etc.) and have them write a one- to two-page biography of you. The purpose of this piece is to get to know you through the eyes of another.

Part Two (three essays)

For part two of the booklet, choose any three of the suggested topics below and write a multiparagraphed reflection for each of the three. Consider any or all of the questions/prompts:

College and Me: Are you planning to attend college? Where will you apply? Which is your number one choice? Why? What steps will you take this year to get accepted to this college? Do you want to attend college locally or do you want to move away to attend school? What do you think you might study? What are the college experiences you most look forward to?

The Questioning Me: Consider a question about your life that is important to you. What are your dreams? Hopes? Worries? Explore a "big" question.

My Accomplishments: Describe a challenging project you completed at some point in your life, along with an explanation of how you

became interested in the project. (e.g., sewing a dress, writing a story, building a shed, or learning to use a photography darkroom). If possible, include something to help the reader understand your project, such as a photograph, a photocopy, a map, or a blueprint.

My Goals: Describe a goal (or series of goals). Why is this your goal? What drives you to reach it? How do you plan on attaining your goal(s)? What steps do you need to take to achieve your goal(s)?

The Future and Me: What are your short-term and long-term plans for a job or a career? What leisure-time activities, travel, or hobbies do you anticipate for the future? Do you plan to start a family? Where will you live?

My Family and Me: Describe your family members and what you like about each one. Include pictures if you wish. What has each member of your family taught you?

The Relaxing Me: What do you do for relaxation? How do you eliminate stress? What do you do to unwind? Discuss your favorite form(s) of entertainment.

People (or Person) I Admire: Explain who your role models are (living or dead, famous or anonymous) and why. Make sure the reader understands the qualities of this person (or people) that you admire.

Humor and Me: Describe your sense of humor. Give examples of your jokes and cartoons, television shows, movies, or books that have made you laugh. Share stories in which your sense of humor came into play. Share a practical joke story.

Me Back When: Share anecdotes from your past. Choose a single incident you believe had an impact on your life. Discuss how you have changed—how you were back then and how you are now. What, specifically, changed you?

Nature and Me: Describe how you relate to the natural world and what you enjoy seeing or doing outdoors (e.g., camping, hiking, surfing). Why is this activity important to you?

Sports and Me: Describe your love affair with sports. What sport do you love playing? Watching? Write about an intense moment you had in athletic competition. Which team has your undying allegiance? Why? What is the most memorable game you have ever seen?

Art and Me: Are you artistic? Where do your artistic talents lie? What does art mean to you? What art do you admire? Why?

Music and Me: What music “gets inside” you? What does music mean to you? What are your favorite types of music? Who are your favorite singers/bands? Do you play music? What does playing music mean to you?

The Movies and Me: Write about any of the following: your favorite films, scenes, actors, directors, or genres. What is that one movie you don’t mind seeing many times? Why?

Animals and Me: Write about an important animal (or animals) in your life. Why is this animal special? What interesting story can you share about this animal?

Regret(s) and Me: What regrets to you have? Consider both past actions and "the road(s) not taken." If you could have a do-over for anything you have said or done in your life, what would you do differently? Why?

Myself and _____: Can you think of a category that is not listed here? If you'd like to write about an element of you not listed here, go for it! One request: please run the idea by the teacher before you begin writing.

When students complete the assignment, their booklet contains six written sketches (three chosen by the teacher; three chosen by the students). They are encouraged to add artwork, photographs, drawings, or any artifacts that enrich their writing. (Grading Note: Because I do not want to start the school year by having to grade 700 essays, I only score two of the six pieces—one they choose as their "best" writing and one that I choose randomly. I do not tell students that only two of pieces will be scored until *after* the project is turned in. Assessment will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 7.)

Capture Your Community

One of the advantages I have with my thirty-eight freshman students is that they are part of a program in which they will return to me as sophomores. Being their English teacher for two years enables me to make sure they have work to do over the summer. In addition to assigning recreational readings, I also require them to participate in a Capture Your Community project.

Through on-campus fund-raising, I purchase a disposable camera for each student (though many students do not need one because they already own or have access to digital cameras). With cameras in hand, I ask my students to capture their community on the 4th of July. I prompt them to look for the people and places that encapsulate the spirit of the community on the holiday. The photos can show the holiday in a positive light (e.g., a community picnic) or a negative light (e.g., a homeless man watching fireworks), but their mission is clear: to capture truthfully the spirit of their community on this holiday.

Students are then required to bring their photos to class on the first day of their sophomore year. The photographs are always quite varied—some students spend a quiet holiday with their immediate family; others travel to participate in grand celebrations elsewhere. Upon returning to school, students spread out their photos and the class shares them through a gallery walk. Once the sharing is complete, I ask students to pick the one photograph of theirs that best captures the spirit of their holiday. It is this photograph that will drive a piece of "small" writing. When all the pieces are complete, we create a booklet entitled *Our Community on the 4th of July*, complete with scanned photographs.

This assignment does not need to be tied to the 4th of July. It works well over winter break or around any other holiday. In the past I have also chosen a day randomly and created a booklet around it (e.g., *A Day in the Life of Our Community: October 15, 2006*).

Limited Choice Assignments for Responding to Literature

The Writing Fountain Early one year my freshman students were reading Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*. They had just finished the vignette, "Hairs," in which Esperanza describes how the hair of her family members differs from person to person. I asked my students to use her essay as a model by writing about the various kinds of hair found in their own families. That night, I was surprised by how quickly I tired of reading their drafts. Frankly, there was a sameness about them that made them boring to read. My father has thick hair. My sister has pretty hair. I do not like my hair. Blah, blah, blah. Reading these, I soon found myself wishing I were doing something more fun, like undergoing root canal surgery.

I took the papers back to class the next day and told my students we would revisit the idea of hair by creating a Writing Fountain (a variation of the Topic Blast). I told them that I had read their papers and for the most part, found them boring. I added that it was probably my fault in that, I, as their teacher, had narrowed their topic too much. I then placed a graphic organizer of a fountain on the overhead with "hair" written on its base and asked the students to consider all the interesting stories that might spring from the topic of hair. I started by writing "my hair history" on one of the streams emanating from the fountain, and went beyond all calls for bravery by showing them photographs of the various stages of the history of my hair. (They howled when I showed them my senior photo, which captures me with long hair.) I then asked the students to create their own hair fountains. In Figure 5.7, you'll see Daniel's fountain.

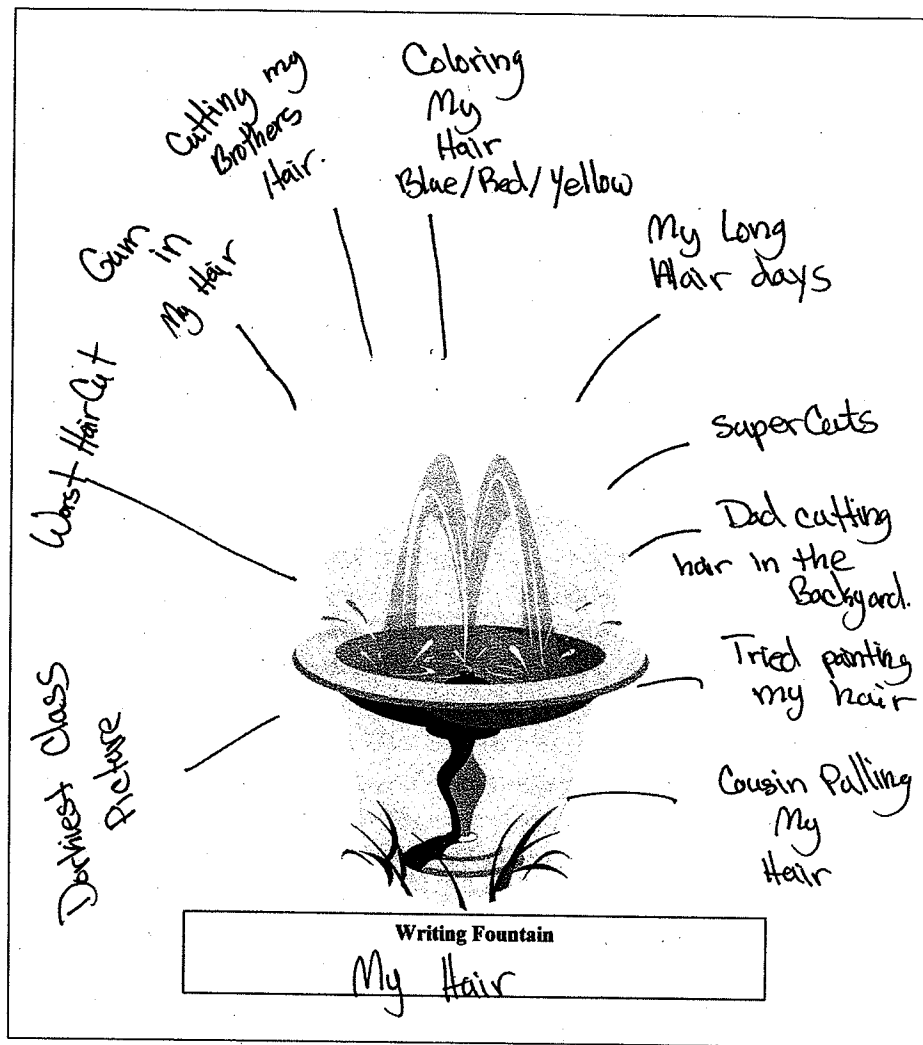
Students then chose which hair angle they wanted to write from. Unlike their first attempts, these new drafts were a pleasure to read—no two essays were the same, and they contained a liveliness that had been missing in their first attempts.

Words of Wisdom Project This project, adapted from Joan Hoffman's article in the March 1998 issue of *Classroom Notes Plus*, works well with any literary work that contains pearls of wisdom. As students begin reading the literary work, they are asked to make note of any words of wisdom they encounter. Upon completing *To Kill a Mockingbird*, for example, students might list the following:

You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view—until you climb into his skin and walk around in it. (p. 34)

Atticus

Figure 5.7 Writing Fountain
for hair



You oughta let your mother know where you are. (p. 143)

Jem

Courage is when you know you're licked before you begin but you begin anyway and you see it through no matter what. (p. 80)

Atticus

I ask students to chart the wisdom as they work their way through the novel. When their reading is completed, students are asked to complete a three-part writing assignment.

Part One

Choose the wisest thing said in To Kill a Mockingbird. Explain how Harper Lee develops this idea in the novel through the use of literary devices (e.g., plot, setting, characters).

When students have written their analyses, we move on to Part Two of the assignment. I bring in copies of H. Jackson Brown's *Life's Little Instruction Book*. Brown wrote this book for his son and gave it to him the day his son left home. In it, Brown has collected all the snippets of wisdom he knows. After students have had a chance to examine the wisdom in Brown's book, they are ready to move to Part Two.

Part Two

Your assignment is to create your own Life's Little Instruction Book. Your booklet must contain the following:

- *Five (or more) pearls of wisdom from To Kill a Mockingbird.*
- *Ten (or more) pearls of wisdom from wise people in your world. Consider asking your parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, neighbors, teachers, coaches, advisors, ministers, your dentist, your mail carrier, your plumber, and the guy working behind the counter at 7/11.*
- *Ten (or more) pearls of wisdom from research sources, including other novels, books, newspapers, websites, television shows, movies, song lyrics, and speeches.*
- *Five (or more) pearls of your own. Consider what you have learned thus far in your life. What advice can you offer?*

I remind the students that their quotes can be philosophical ("Never cut what can be untied"), practical ("Always own a good dictionary"), or humorous ("Boys, always flush the urinal with your elbow"). I bring in some resources of wisdom (*Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*; toastmaster books), but for the most part the creation of their booklets is done almost exclusively at home. I do not spend much class time on it.

Here are the directions for Part Three, which I give to my students the day they bring their finished booklets to class:

Part Three

1. *Revisit the wise things you found from the people whom you talked to directly. Choose one pearl of wisdom that you believe to be particularly wise.*
2. *Interview this person for a second time, asking how he or she came to believe this piece of wisdom. For example, if your grandfather told you, "Slow and easy wins the race," ask him how he learned that lesson in his life. Ask your source to describe an experience that he or she had that made that pearl of wisdom a truism. Through this second interview, find the story behind the wisdom.*
3. *Write the story.*

I like this assignment because it gives students some say in the direction of their papers. They are given choice in whom to interview and choice again when they decide which pearl of wisdom they will research and write about. The best part of this assignment is that it spawns interesting discussions between my students and wise people.

Limited Choice Assignments for Expository Compositions:

The Half-and-Half Research Paper

The senior curriculum in my school district requires that my students write an historical investigation report. For the past ten years, I have led my seniors through an extensive unit on the Kennedy assassination. Through a number of films, lectures, photographs, eyewitness accounts, and other artifacts, my students carefully examine the events of November 22, 1963. I chose the Kennedy assassination for two reasons: (1) it is the most fascinating eight seconds in American history, and (2) it fit into that year's senior theme, "Overcoming the Wasteland" (many people believe that America's modern wasteland began when those shots rang out in Dealey Plaza). Upon completion of this unit, students write a traditional research paper outlining the events of the assassination.

After reading these papers over a number of years, I began getting tired of them. The sameness of the papers began to numb me as I repeatedly read the same account. I realized the assignment needed life infused into it. Four years ago, I changed the assignment from a straightforward research paper to what I call the half-and-half research paper.

In the half-and-half research paper, the students share traditional research in the first half of the paper. For the Kennedy assignment, for example, students must demonstrate they understand the basics—the who, what, when, where, and why of the event. They must understand the government's findings and should be able to demonstrate that they have a grasp of the key conspiracy theories.

It is in the second half of the paper that the assignment opens up so that students can choose their avenues of exploration. In the second half, students are asked to find the one element they are most intrigued by and to research it in depth. I have one caveat: their research must be driven by a student-generated question. Here are some of the questions my seniors have explored:

- Did Oswald act alone?
- Was there a second gunman on the grassy knoll?
- Who is the "Babushka Lady"? Why has she never been found?
- Is there a connection between Kennedy and the mob?
- How likely is it that Cuba played a role in the assassination?
- Were the Russians involved in the killing?
- What is the "magic bullet"? Can it be explained?
- What happened behind the closed doors of the emergency room at Parkland Hospital?

Because they had some say in their avenues of research (and because it's an interesting topic), my students worked very hard on their papers. Again, one benefit as a teacher is that I am not stuck repeatedly reading the same paper.

The Kennedy paper has become a senior tradition at my school, but this year those of us who teach the twelfth grade decided it was time for change.

As I am writing this, my students are investigating the events of 9/11, and when their research is completed I will assign the half-and-half format. In the first half of their papers students will outline the events of that fateful day; in the second half they will each pick a hot spot to research. Some of them have already chosen topics:

- What happened on Flight 93?
- What happened inside the Pentagon that day? What was the extent of the damage (lives/national security)?
- Structurally, why did the towers collapse?
- What happened inside the towers prior to the collapse?
- Who were the attackers, and why did they attack us?
- Is it fair to say the U.S. ignored crucial intelligence prior to 9/11?
- As a result of 9/11, are we now safer?
- What are the criticisms from the 9/11 Commission Report?
- What effects (short-term/long-term) did that day have on our economy?
- What are the pros and cons of arming air marshals and airline pilots?
- What are the pros and cons of the color-coded warning system?
- What art (music, film, paintings, sculptures) has been inspired by the events of 9/11?
- Was 9/11 exploited to justify invading Iraq?
- Why do so many Americans believe that Iraq was involved in 9/11?
- What will be built at Ground Zero? How was this decision made?
- What are some of the conspiracy theories? Do any of them hold water?
- Is it too early for Hollywood to make 9/11 films?

Unlike reading lockstep research papers, reading these papers will be interesting because no two will be alike.

Limited Choice Assignments for Persuasive Compositions:

The Four-Sided Argument

One of the dangers in writing persuasive papers is that my students frequently see complex issues in black and white, often without much consideration to the point of view of others. To shake them from their tunnel vision I assign the four-sided argument.

I first introduced the four-sided argument years ago in the shadow of the O. J. Simpson trial. My students were worked up over it, so much so that when the verdict was read they had a hard time even considering any viewpoints contrary to their own. To get them past this, I had the class brainstorm a list of the stakeholders in the trial. They started with the obvious names:

O. J. Simpson
The jury foreman
Marcia Clark
Alan Park (O. J.'s limo driver)

Kato Kaelin
Judge Ito
Nicole Brown's sister
O. J.'s daughter

Mark Furman
Johnny Cochran
Ron Goldman's father
TV newsperson

When they finished we had a list of over thirty stakeholders. Students were asked to choose four stakeholders, making sure that the four chosen possessed differing views. Students were then assigned to write four one-page responses to the verdict, each from the point of view of a different stakeholder.

I have used this strategy a number of times since, most recently when the citizens of Orange County (where I live and teach) were fighting over the issue of building a new airport in the middle of the county. The debate was heated, but like most debates, it wasn't simply black and white; there were many valid arguments. Having students consider the issue from various points of view (e.g., a land developer, a homeowner, a pilot, or the mayor) broadened their thinking on the issue. After students carefully considered the viewpoints of various stakeholders, they were much better prepared to write compelling persuasive essays on the issue.

These four examples—(1) the Introduce Yourself Booklet, (2) the Capture Your Community Paper, (3) the Words of Wisdom Project, and (4) the Four-Sided Argument—are appealing to students because they all have an element of choice in them. Once students are up and running as writers, I work toward opening up broader student choice. Here are two assignments my students enjoy that allow them wide-open choice.

Ever Wonder Why?

The comedian Gallagher (no relation—he has more money; I have more hair) once asked a truly puzzling question: “Did you ever wonder what a chair would look like if your knees bent the other way?” Okay, so maybe that one is a little too deep. But surely there are questions out there worth careful consideration, questions that burn inside your brain (Ralph Fletcher calls these “Fierce Wonderings” [1996]). To get my students to start thinking about questions that pique their curiosity, I give them a quiz pulled from Douglas B. Smith’s *Ever Wonder Why?* (1991). Here are the questions I gave to my students:

1. Why are wedding bands worn on the fourth finger of the left hand?
2. Why are tennis balls fuzzy?
3. Why is blue considered a boys' color?
4. Why do worms come out on the sidewalk when it rains?
5. Why is someone who is feeling great said to be “on cloud nine”?
6. Why do we nod our heads yes and shake our heads no?
7. Why do ostriches stick their heads in the ground?
8. Why do bats sleep upside down?

I assure them that there are answers to each of these questions and give each group a few minutes to hypothesize. We then share out, and this discussion is always rich and full of laughter. (See Figure 5.8 for the answers to the eight questions.) This exercise prepares students to develop awareness about those things they truly wonder about. To further nudge them in this direction, I share my list of things I truly wonder about.

Figure 5.8 *Answers to Ever Wonder Why*

"Ever Wonder Why?" Answers

1. Wedding bands are always worn on the third finger because it was once thought to be the site of the vein of love.
2. The fuzz slows the ball down in flight so it won't bounce too high.
3. It was once believed that blue (the color of the heavens) held off evil spirits who tried to invade infant boys.
4. Worms come out on the sidewalk when it rains because their bodies are full of water and they are seeking higher ground.
5. Types of clouds are numbered according to the altitude they obtain. Nine is the highest, symbolizing the idea of floating above all your problems.
6. Charles Darwin related these head gestures to a baby's nursing habits. Babies who want to eat move their heads up and down. Babies who don't move their heads side to side.
7. Ostriches rarely stick their heads in the ground, but when they do they are looking for water.
8. Bats sleep upside down so they can hang from the ceiling and avoid predators.

Ten Things Mr. Gallagher Wonders About

1. I wonder how my iPod can hold 5,000 songs.
2. I wonder what happens to a lost email. Where does it go?
3. I wonder where our moon came from.
4. I wonder how it is possible to play a video game with another person who is sitting somewhere else in the world.
5. The Queen Mary weighs 81,000 tons. How does it float? A 747 weighs 1,200 tons. How does it fly?
6. I wonder who had the courage to drink the first glass of milk.
7. I wonder where the idea of wearing neckties originated.
8. I wonder how astronomers know that planets exist outside our solar system if they can't see them.
9. I wonder how GPS systems in cars work.
10. I wonder how a DVD actually produces visuals and sound.

After our initial discussions of "I wonder why" questions, students are now ready to develop their own "I wonder . . ." lists. Because the lists are generated from their own interests, students are much more motivated when it comes time to write.

I Am an Expert

Everyone has expertise in one area or another. Here, for example, are ten things I could write about with a reasonable degree of expertise:

body surfing
scuba diving

Disneyland
baseball
negotiating airports
driving the southern California freeway system
reading
seventies rock music
the Kennedy assassination
waiting tables

After sharing my list with my students, I ask them to generate lists of their own. Here are three of them:

Adrian

making quesadillas
Anaheim fast food
building Legos
rock climbing
water polo
TV show *Lost*
wakeboarding
Kobe

Linda

dancing
cross-country running
debating
making my parents mad
cleaning the house
TV show *South Park*
finding out secrets
getting out of trouble

Jimena

Texas Hold 'Em
making eggs
the Holocaust
Johnny Depp
anemia
TV show *Full House*
chess
drawing

Once their lists are complete, students choose topics from their lists and then share their expertise in writing.

A variation of this assignment: Have students brainstorm a list of areas where they *wish* they had expertise (e.g., how to fly a plane, the Vietnam War, raising chinchillas). Have them conduct research and share their research in writing. Upon the completion of the writing, each student orally shares something he or she learned. (For tips on how to facilitate the research process, I recommend Ken Macrorie's *The I-Search Paper: Revised Edition of Searching Writing*).

This chapter began with Todd's complaint that student writing is forced upon students only as a means of making teachers look good. One way of moving students beyond this mind-set and to help them develop as writers is by infusing choice into the writing process. As Laura Robb, a teacher of forty-three years and author of fifteen books, once told me, "We have a nation of students who can't write very well. We will not have a nation of students who can write well until they are allowed to write about the things they care about."

Creating opportunities for students to have choice while writing doesn't mean that teachers must give up control of their classrooms. Rather, as Anderman and Midgely (1998) have found, "Even small opportunities for choice . . . gives students a greater sense of autonomy" (p. 3). Likewise, Paula Denton (2005), after examining thirty-two studies on the effect that choice has on learning, found that "most of the research demonstrated that when

students had choices in their learning, they became highly engaged and productive. They were excited about learning and shared their knowledge. They were likely to think more deeply and creatively, work with more persistence, and willingly use a range of academic skills and strategies" (p. 2). Rather than forcing students to write about things they don't care about, creating student choice within our writing assignments helps students like Todd realize that learning to write holds way more value than simply making the teacher look good.